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ABSTRACT

Although there is widespread publicity about the involvement of businesses with schools, and as President Reagan as well as authors of reform reports continue to call upon the private sector to help education, it is unclear to what extent such relationships exist and what they are accomplishing. A 10-page, 55-question survey was mailed to the chief executive officers of a sample of 500 corporations on the Forbes 500 list, with a 69 percent return (345 usable responses). The questionnaire was intended to identify what kinds of corporations would be more likely to participate in collaborative efforts with schools, who initiates the collaboration, the kinds of partnerships, the motivations of the corporations to participate, and benefits of the partnership. Analysis of survey responses showed that 73 percent of corporations work with schools, a majority with Adopt-A-School programs. Banks, utility companies, and insurance companies are the most likely corporate participants, although many other industries also participate. Most of the relationships consist of sending speakers, giving tours, and donating equipment. Motivations of the corporations to participate in school affairs include improving student academic achievement, improving career education, providing business role models for students, and promoting a favorable business image in the community. The study also found that having a relationship with schools improves the schools' image in the corporate mind. The study concluded, however, that business participation in schools is minimal, sporadic, and has a small effect on education. (KC)

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Business as Usual: Exploring Private Sector Participation in American Public Schools

by

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Descriptions of on-going school-business partnerships fill the pages of many books, grace the covers of glossy magazines, and reach even those of us who only watch the nightly news. While the presence of the private sector in education may result in political, social, and economic change, its activity continues to be episodic rather than sustained and its impact has yet to be defined.

As the voice of President Reagan as well as authors of reform reports continue to call upon the private sector to join forces with the public to help insure the vitality of the American system of public education, the nature, extent, and significance of these collaborations are unclear. Although it can be demonstrated that the history of school-business interaction has been filled with examples of cooperation and shared responsibility, there have been other instances where suspicion, distrust, and blame have characterized these relationships. Of what sort are today's corporate-school interactions?

The number of collaborative ventures grows daily, yet in order to determine what these partnerships are all about, both the corporate and school perspectives need to be investigated. Why do businesses involve themselves in collaborative efforts with school districts? What do they hope to gain? Better workers? Positive public opinion? Control of public school education? The literature on school-business partnerships tells us very little

that would help us answer our questions, since most of the research on this topic has been undertaken from the perspective of school participants. Therefore, we sought to understand school-business collaboration more fully by asking chief executive officers (CEO's) of major corporations if they participated in such partnerships and, if so, why?

This paper will report the responses to a mail survey which attempted to answer the following questions: What kinds of corporations are involved in partnerships? Is there a kind or type of corporation which would be more likely to get involved with public schools? What activites are in place? Do particular kinds of corporations support particular kinds of collaborations? What motivates the corporate community to get involved? How does the corporate community view public education? Is the "typical" corporate partner one who is philanthropic in other ways?

The 809 corporations on the Forbes 500 list were selected as the population for study because they represent the largest and most financially successful elements in the business world. Because a sample of 260 is necessary to be representative of that population (Krejcie and Morgan, 1970), we drew a sample of 500, oversampling to insure the necessary return rate. The results of this inquiry are based upon a 69% return rate or 345 usable responses -- a number well-above the 260 required for representativeness. Non-response bias tests were undertaken to determine whether those who did not respond differed significantly from those who did. No significant differences were found between

the two groups.

A 55 question, 10-page survey was mailed with an individually typed cover letter to the sample of chief executive officers. One week later a postcard reminder was sent to everyone. Three weeks after the postcard, a letter and replacement questionnaire were sent to nonrespondents. In addition to returning the survey, many respondents included printed information on the corporate-school relationships in which they participate.

Who Participates?

We sought to learn whether a kind or type of corporation would be more likely to participate in collaborative efforts with schools. Among the large corporations studied in this inquiry, we found representation in all major corporate areas, with over 73% participating in joint ventures with public schools and 45% describing these relationships as Adopt-A-School programs. Most companies (61%) work with just one school system, and a majority have been conducting these partnerships for more than two years. For over half (54.7%), the collaboration in which they are engaged is their first involvement in public education.

According to the corporate spokesperson, about a third of the partnerships were initiated by them. In most cases, a vice president for community affairs or the person designated as the public relations officer contacts and works with a teacher, principal, or superintendent. Sixty-two percent of the corporations reported working with comprehensive high schools, while only 25% collaborate with specialized or vocational high

schools; 40% of the businesses are involved with junior high schools or middle schools and just 28% have contact with elementary schools. Because some corporations work at all levels, these percentages do not total 100.

Banks, utility companies, and insurance companies accounted for 26.3%, 19.5%, and 5%, respectively, of all partnerships discussed. Other corporate areas that are heavily involved in partnerships include heavy equipment manufacturers, department stores, drug and chemical manufacturers, data processing firms, and the broadcasting industry -- each of these sectors accounts for 4.2% of the partnerships described.

We further wanted to know what corporate types are the most likely sources of collaborations. Insurance companies, banking institutions and utility companies are likely sources for collaboration -- 83% of the insurance companies, 53% of the banks, and 50% of the utility companies respond that they are involved in school-corporate partnerships. These, then, may be receptive businesses to approach for partnerships. Other corporate sectors that show strong involvement include the oil industry (47%), department stores (46%), drug manufacturers (53%), electronic companies (50%), data processing firms (46%), and the lodging (50%) and aerospace industries (50%).

Types of Partnerships

Next we wanted to determine what kinds of partnerships these corporations support. What do they look like, how much corporate money and time is represented, and how are they different from

past arrangements? We discovered that these partnerships aren't much different than corporate involvement reported in an earlier day (Timpane, 1982). Corporations still provide speakers for school programs (67%), sponsor achievement awards for students (31%), help with career days (51%), donate equipment (57%), offer job training (16%), conduct internships (18%), give in-house tours for school children (65%), tutor students (26%), arrange and sponsor leadership conferences (26%), put on assembly programs (22%), and serve as mentors (18%). Although many tout Adopt-A-School programs, the evidence fails to demonstrate how adopting a school differs from past corporate efforts. It would seem to be yet another case of old wine in new bottles. Further, it would appear from the results of this survey that the type of corporation doesn't make much of a difference in terms of the services offered. Banks and bottle manufacturers sing the same song. They also spend close to the same amounts of money. For over half the respondents (55%), their involvement costs them less than $10,000 a year. No corporation stated that they spent more than $10,000, but many respondents indicated that they didn't know or couldn't determine the price tag of their endeavors.

While all of these ventures are important and useful, none are described in a way that would lead one to conclude that business involvement is going to make a real difference in the quality of American public school education, although a majority of the respondents (58%) said that their efforts are aimed at improving student academic achievement while nearly half stress

improved career education as their goal.

Motivation to Partner

What are some of the other reasons that corporate representatives give for being involved with public schools? The most often expressed reason for joint ventures is to secure a more favorable image of the corporation within the community. Two other rationales offered by about a quarter of the respondents are to provide business role models for students and to help schools resolve financial and administrative problems. Only 9% had as a goal improving the financial management of the school system. Eight percent and 6% of the respondents, respectively, are using these programs to teach students the benefits of the free enterprise system or to provide a better trained workforce.

Having children or grandchildren appears to motivate corporate decisionmakers to work with schools. There is a strong correlation between those folks who have children and grandchildren and whether or not partnerships exist. Those who have children or grandchildren are more likely to be involved in partnership activities and those whose children or grandchildren are in public schools, as opposed to private schools, are more likely to support public education. In this sample, nearly 83% of the respondents have children or grandchildren, with 40% of them in public and 20% in private elementary and secondary schools. The remainder of the children and grandchildren who attend school are in public and private universities.

Reasons that corporations give for not being involved with

public schools are either philosophic or practical. Nearly half found that their employees did not have the time to volunteer and the corporation was unable or unwilling to compensate them for their time. Another 40% believe that business and education are separate entities, somewhat like church and state, and should remain that way.

Benefits for Education

The actual benefits to schools of these partnerships were not directly studied in this inquiry. Although corporations report they give time and money to their local schools, these bequests are minimal by corporate accounts; we have no way of knowing how effective their efforts are since we didn't study school outcomes. However, it occurred to us that other benefits might accrue from such exchanges. Particularly, we were interested in determining whether or not involvement in partnerships improves the image of education among corporate community members. Aside from the obvious benefits, corporate partnerships do appear to increase goodwill toward schools. The corporate liaisons report satisfaction in their collaborations with public schools. A whopping 81% are pleased with their involvement in public schools, while only .8% want to end their commitments at the earliest date possible. While 46.8% of those involved have not changed their opinions about public schools because of their involvements, 44.2% have had their views altered, with 75% of these corporate representatives being more positively inclined toward American education and more interested in participating in the improvement

of American public schools. At the same time, those involved with public schools from a corporate perspective hold that this perspective can improve education -- specifically, that educational inefficiency can be corrected by implementing sounder business approaches and that educators must be held accountable for their products, i.e. students.

Interestingly, although the majority feel that school-corporate partnerships will improve education, most of the respondents see little or no need for better educational services or facilities within their own districts. On the other hand, the same people believe there is some need for economic development and better cultural facilities within these same communities. In the order of perceived need, the respondents ranked increases in cultural facilities first, followed by better public recreational services, economic development, improved health care, additional educational services and facilities, with social service needs perceived as being the least in need of improvement.

The majority of the respondents (87.7%) assert that education is not the sole responsibility of the schools and that community and corporate involvement is crucial to excellence. On the other hand, more than half of the respondents report that business needs are in direct conflict with those of educators while 40% see no relationship between education and industry. These attitudes might offer clues to explain the difficulties present in developing creative and educationally sound partnerships.

Only 15% of the respondents believe that students need more

and better practical experience to become better employees, giving support to the movement away from vocational or career education and toward academic training as a cornerstone of the workforce. Unfortunately, these respondents aren't convinced that students are getting such an education and 95.7% hold that new employees are less well educated today than they were in the past.

A considerable majority (72.9%) maintain that it is the responsibility of the federal government to finance education and that the government needs to spend more, not less, on public education. A smaller, but still significant, proportion (53.2%) assume that business, too, must increase the level of corporate giving to both K-12 and higher education.

It's clear from this survey that corporate representatives have not been motivated by President Reagan's call for corporate support in schools, nor do these folks believe that the federal government should step out of public education. Only 4.6% list President Reagan's call for private sector initiatives in education as a reason for becoming involved in public schools and about the same number indicate an awareness of his push for corporate involvement in public schools. Fewer than 10% indicate that they are working with public schools in an effort to fill the void left by government cutbacks to education. While they do support corporate involvement, they trust even more strongly in federal involvement and financing of public education.

Education and Corporate Philanthropy

Finally, we sought to study whether or not the typical

corporate partner is one who is philanthropic in other ways, and our survey told us that education was just one of many philanthropic efforts that a majority (83.7%) of the corporations participate in. While education is a high priority for these corporate givers, improvement of cultural facilities, health related assistance, and housing and neighborhood development also occupy their efforts. Interestingly, these respondents feel it is more important to be involved in philanthropic efforts than to take care of the environment, to assure equal opportunity within their own corporations, or to address the occupational health and safety concerns of their employees. In attempting to understand this perspective, we were reminded that in many cases the person who completed the survey was not the CEO, but rather the officer in charge of public relations or community outreach. For these people, community satisfaction might well outweigh employee welfare.

In terms of money spent on societal issues, the corporate givers identify drug abuse programs as the area in which the most money is spent, followed by education, issues concerned with the aged, poverty programs, and programs to end urban decay.

Impact of Partnerships

The results of the inquiry led us to ponder some larger questions and, knowing how corporate officers describe their involvement in schools, to speculate upon them. There has been chronic concern that American education is being co-opted by the larger and more powerful interests of big business (Karier,

Violas, & Spring, 1973; Katz, 1973). While this investigation did not directly confront this concern, our position is that if corporations are molding our schools, their most effective tools are not partnership activities. Based upon our data, joint ventures appear not to threaten the integrity of the school, since they are not integral to the daily life of schools. The amount of time, effort, and money that goes into these relationships is not sufficient to control or direct the process of schooling. This is not to say that the corporate voice is not strong, but rather that corporate influence on schooling is most effectively wielded in ways other than partnership programs, for instance through membership on schoolboards, by supporting (and therefore directing) research, and through other policy level education activities.

For those who worry that corporate America is attempting to vocationalize the school system, the results of this study might be reassuring. The respondents overwhelmingly support academic, not vocational, skills and background as the prerequisites for an effective workforce.

This study offers evidence that there is much room for growth of partnerships, if school districts wish to take the initiative. Corporations seem willing to respond to minimal requests from school districts, and perhaps are more open to larger scale innovations if presented with an organized, coherent plan. The programmatic efforts currently underway will only produce incremental change. If school leaders really want corporate help

in achieving "excellence", there will need to be more substantial collaboration than currently exists. This is a finding that is not surprising and one supported by a three year study by the Committee for Economic Development (1985).

Finally, these results have implications for federal support of public education. Although President Reagan has called upon the private sector (as well as local and state governments) to increase their support of public education, this study tells us that this request has been ignored. In large numbers, the corporate representatives -- spokespeople for the largest and most financially endowed institutions in our society -- say that the federal government must increase support for public education. Further, many are uncomfortable with increased corporate giving because even they fear corporate control of schools. Thus, while they feel willing to give schools "a helping hand" (Timpane, 1982), corporations are not enthusiastic about taking over a role that they believe properly belongs to the federal government. They speak "loud and clear" and the message is that corporate leaders are comfortable continuing the relationships with schools that they have had for decades. In other words, they want to keep up with "business as usual."

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